

# LANDSCAPE URBANISM

*A Manual for the  
Machinic Landscape*

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## In Conversation with Michel Desvigne: Intermediate Landscapes

**Perhaps we could begin by talking about your London project. The park you designed beside the Thames was intended to accommodate the Richard Rogers Partnership Millennium Dome in the short term and to form the heart of a new residential district in the future. What is the nature of this project, which seems to be attempting to reconstruct a primitive landscape out of a former industrial wasteland?**

The Greenwich peninsula is in fact a meander of the Thames that was so badly polluted by previous industrial installations that it was necessary to strip the entire area to two metres below the existing ground level in order to decontaminate it. As a consequence, the project began with a radical site-clearance strategy. Given this starting point, the pursuit of a quasi-archaeological approach – seeking to reinstate historical marks on a *tabula rasa* site – seemed absurdly artificial. Equally, we rejected the idea of structuring the new park around the conventional stereotypical urban park forms that seemed to be suggested by the brief – the amphitheatre, pond, thematic gardens and monuments. Instead, by abandoning formal cues and cultural stereotypes, we were able to focus on reinventing the primeval substructure of the territory itself.

This approach required the invention of a powerful texture capable of giving quality to this formless environment – making the land habitable (by which I mean protected from the wind), framing the spectacular views and orientating the space. We wanted a texture against which forms and spaces could be created, but which would remain independent of the temporary layout of the ‘millennium experience’.

Using references to geomorphological conditions of a similar scale and context, we imagined how nature itself might have colonized the site, and this conceptual starting point led to

the proposal of a type of landscape texture modelled on the precedent of an alluvial forest. Our young forest, planted on a regular nursery grid, will develop in two successive phases, composed initially of a homogeneous stratum of 12,000 densely planted saplings, mainly hornbeams, out of which the spaces for the millennium experience have been sculpted. Over time this layer will thin out and be replaced by larger, nobler species – birch, alder, oak and willow – which will define the permanent spaces of the corridor. The more mature woods will themselves be sculpted according to future, unknown urban demands.

The exceptional temporal and physical scale of the project led to the creation of what I would call an intermediate landscape: a living landscape texture flexible enough to be integrated into a future urban context. This process appears to be comparable to the reconstruction of a natural landscape, but our starting point is explicitly artificial. We are playing with an architecture that relies on texture and variations of density rather than on composition of volume and mass, a process that endows this landscape with a ‘naturalism’ that is at odds with our cultural conventions, be they landscape or urban.

**Could one consider the Greenwich project an attempt to implement an ‘ecological treatment’ of a territory?**

I am currently heavily involved in teaching and research at Harvard. This work brings me into contact with professionals and students whose cultural approach to ecology is less technical and more ideological than our own. Ecology is considered above all else a method of deploying a living medium onto a given site in order to create a preconceived final form. This approach to nature is as different from our own as it is from the Germanic concept of a Romantic landscape. In fact, I am regularly surprised in the United States to encounter woods, prairies and marshlands in the heart of urban areas. These are artificial landscapes, and yet they are handled with a type of rusticity that is unknown in the language of European landscape architecture. The aesthetic of this American landscape, established by the likes of Frederick Law Olmsted, dates from the nineteenth century. It is far removed from the aesthetic of picturesque or naturalistic gardens: it seeks neither to re-create imagery from paintings nor to enforce ornamental principles, but proceeds from a desire to establish aesthetically pre-determined, authentic living environments. Unfortunately, contemporary American landscape



architecture has strayed far from this culture, as marketing pressures tend to turn projects into overworked caricatures.

With my Harvard students we have taken on the derelict urban fringes of Boston, those abandoned areas next to roads, railways and industrial infrastructures, spaces that in fact belong to no official spatial categories. By mapping these sites, we have discovered that they make up a staggering 25 per cent of the overall urban area. In Europe we would typically seek to structure and integrate these voids by imposing order through grids and alignments. By contrast, the projects we have developed at Harvard tend to use modest and pragmatic means to evolve a new type of urban geography: making good the ground, decontaminating in situ, restoring the soil's fertility, diverting storm water and putting in place modest long-term maintenance strategies. These techniques encourage a progressive establishment of a powerful landscape on the abandoned sites. This type of natural process defines a parasitic landscape that is absorbed into the urban context at the geographical scale. The form of this landscape is more about process than composition.

#### **Is the emphasis on technique in effect determining the aesthetic of the project?**

The approach may seem technical, but it is rooted in the landscape traditions of the nineteenth century. The aesthetic is the aesthetic of transformation: the landscape develops as a product of processes of transformation, which are proposed and organized by the landscape architect. But it is true that these techniques do tend to result in a 'naturalistic' landscape – the woodlands, prairies and marshlands referred to earlier. In France we tend to impose order to improve the legibility (and functionality) of suburban areas. In this way, trees fill in for architecture, a grid of trees replacing a composition of facades.

The historic legitimacy of such practices (which across the Atlantic are described as *à la française*) is not actually proven. We tend to behave as if the classical models, and especially those of Haussmann, are our only means of dealing with suburban complexities. I find that these leaden references cloud the contemporary townscape and deny the opportunity of exploiting the real diversity and wealth of the environment. As to their capacity to improve the urban fabric, they seem rather feeble and irresolute.

One could define the American townscape as a vast suburb. However, the presence of this

intriguing 'naturalistic' landscape holds some very pertinent lessons for improving the European suburbs: abundant planting that has developed a genuine geographical logic, with a grouping and spacing of trees that owes more to natural imperatives of soil, drainage and exposure than to artificial design. A 'naturalism' that when juxtaposed with a wholly functional and geometric form (such as a road) creates a true beauty of contrast. A landscape that develops a sense of unity, like a forest, within which built interventions are given their own genuine coherence. It is precisely this type of 'naturalistic' reference that we have proposed for the townscape of the Greenwich peninsula.

**But is not this American 'naturalism' also related to the fact that it is a less worked landscape, a landscape less marked by human history?**

This is not so true in the Northeast, between Boston and Washington, where densities approach those of Europe. There is a greater consciousness in the States of how urban contexts are actually fabricated. Children's books show how streets, pavements and urban services are built. The city is explicitly built on urban infrastructures. Buildings connect to these permanent infrastructures but are in a constant state of transformation. Paradoxically this pragmatism leaves nature a real part to play in the development of urban areas. This is not due to the continental scale of space found in the US or to its supposedly shorter history of human intervention, but has much more to do with a clearer distinction between what is created and what is given. In France, the town and country, our beautiful villages and historic centres, are all perceived as part of an overall heritage, but the management of development or conservation is divided among numerous organizations, so the overall 'collective' command of the process is inevitably weak. How else can one explain the type of passivity and inertia that has been the response to recent developments: the intrusive parcelling of sites, suburban sprawl, the proliferation of highways and the destruction of entrances to cities?

**Is this absence of coordination of the built environment as relevant to the French suburbs as it is to the historic fabric?**

The American suburbs are built in such a way that one never gets lost. By contrast, we are all constantly getting lost in French suburbs, because of the confusion of differing institutions:

a dedicated motorway, a national route, a departmental road, a municipal street, all functioning within their own logic and with their own architectural language – signage, fencing and pavements. When I travel, I move from the A2 to the N13 to the ring road to the D14 to finally arrive on an urban street. In the US, the system shows an overall consistency that stretches from the orthogonal division of the states themselves to the tightest urban street grid. In France, the process of fabrication has been rendered illegible by the institutions tasked with controlling the physical environment, and this confuses and overpowers all suburban projects.

### **What form should one give the landscape today?**

Landscape has a preexisting form that in Europe appears to have been overwhelmed and rendered indecipherable. In the US, as in some developing countries, either through economy or pragmatism, the infrastructures and real-estate parcelling are so brutally superimposed onto the landscape that each of the different strata can be clearly discerned. This brutality, while sometimes horrific, can also be splendid, as it was in northern Italy. It results in a legible landscape. The situation in France is more complex, as the distinctions are blurred and confused, most notably in the large-scale motorway projects whose construction has more to do with politics than engineering. Abstract criteria are the guiding forces behind the imposition of these often grotesque physical interventions on the countryside.

The problem given to the landscape architect is to render the illogical logical, to integrate, to dissolve and to decorate with anecdotal interventions. Toll roads determine specific points of passage. These are then obliged to be connected to the existing town centres through ‘gateways’, which are notionally ‘urbanized’ with a palette of classical and Haussmannian devices. Faced with this very real confusion, it seems to me far more honest to clear, remove and clarify in order to regain the legibility of each stratum – nature, construction, infrastructure – in the process creating breathing space.

### **Does this type of ‘aesthetic cleansing’ seem to you the only possible modern approach?**

I am totally convinced that it is the only way, and this has been the approach we have taken at three new stations on the TGV Mediterranean Line [Valence, Avignon, Marseilles]. The stations are all located on the fringes of cities in a landscape that is strongly fashioned by an

agricultural past but is now experiencing a phase of total transformation. Our work focused on recognizing, classifying, distilling and prioritizing the elements of the landscape. From this research we then create a new working language – the project ecology. For example, we exhumed from the mess of the Rhône Valley's urban peripheries the hedgerows, the orchards and the lines of plane trees, measuring and recording the proportions of these elements and translating them into our project. The enormous car parks of the TGV stations are treated as traditional orchards, grouped in a manner that is derived from the existing horticultural systems (albeit at a different scale). The car parks and buildings of the stations are thus grafted onto a system that stretches far beyond the actual site, into a total landscape that we would claim we are reactivating. Aesthetically, this is a game of substitution: the overall structure remains, but each individual element changes. This is not composition in the classical sense but a simultaneous insertion into and transformation of an existing landscape structure; there is no imposition of an exotic model but rather a transformation of indigenous elements.

In the Avignon project, this experiment has been extended beyond the confines of the station and into the whole area of the confluence of the Rhône and the Durance. A number of architectural teams are developing projects on the peninsula, and we, in our capacity as landscape architects, are acting as the custodians of the 'language'. Our brief is to support each team by recommending simplifications, clarifications and transformations that ensure that, at every level and scale, the legibility and the coherence of the landscape are conserved and reinforced.

**Your TGV projects are possible because of the enormous political power of the client, but how can one proceed without political support and in landscapes whose coherence has already been seriously blurred?**

I think one can find inspiration, again, from certain aspects of American landscape. The work of Olmsted seems particularly relevant and stimulating. Although we are all familiar with Central Park, in New York, I believe his less known and admittedly less spectacular work in Boston is of great contemporary relevance. Rather than simply designing the park as stated in his brief, Olmsted was drawn by the fact that Boston is built on an estuary whose maritime

rivers were silting up with sediment. He took this problem as the pretext for abandoning the notion of an ornamental park and instead implemented a real working landscape in the heart of the city, a landscape based on hydraulic requirements and made up of a system of dykes and basins capable of controlling storm water and sedimentation. Rather than proposing a conventional park on the surface and solving the technical problems underground, Olmsted used the rainwater itself to shape a true landscape, a topography that eventually determined the structure of the residential borough of Brookline in the suburbs of Boston. In a park treated as a functional landscape, the plants became, by necessity, part of the overall system of drainage and irrigation: where picturesque floral ornamentations were expected, Olmsted installed marshland and copses, and all this in the very heart of a city that was itself under construction.

Today's work with the Harvard students is to develop just such an approach, but this time in relation to the abandoned sites in Boston. We proposed transforming the problem of flooding into a virtue, an opportunity for the creation of a landscape: given that the railways and roads are located on floodplains, we designed ditches that follow the routes and terminate in basins dug into the industrial peripheries of town. There, as the maturing process develops, marshlands and poplar groves ensure good drainage and evaporation. Our objective is certainly not technical; but, perhaps ironically, technical and financial criteria have ended up legitimizing the construction of a coherent public landscape within a derelict area of suburban sprawl.

### **Is such an approach impossible in France?**

France is a country where the role of the public sector is paramount – a situation that has no real parallel in the US. The French political system tends to generate large and grand projects – residential areas, business centres, elegant public parks – all geared towards integrating peripheral urban areas. Alas, it sometimes means waiting as much as 20 years before these proposals finally leave the drawing board, and in the meantime a whole generation has already grown up among the wasteland.

The approach we have taken in Boston and experimented with in London accepts the need to work with the temporary and the uncertain. In the absence of financial means or political



will, we propose developing the vacant sites with rudimentary, agriculturally inspired techniques that establish a form of landscape with a geographical dimension. These sites are principally located around lines of infrastructure, together with which they form a coherent geography superimposed over the whole town.

The colonization by this temporary landscape gives these sites a powerful role to play in the transformation of the urban environment. At the very least it creates a temporary landscape that improves derelict areas. At the very best, and given that cities will develop around infrastructures, it could become a genuine catalyst for the regeneration of the suburbs.

*Translated by Philip Gumuchjian*